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ABSTRACT

This report outlines the overall design and implementation of Teacher Support Teams (TSTs), a concept developed under the auspices of the Massachusetts Board of Education to help administrators, teachers, and other school personnel and parents to identify at-risk students in regular education. TSTs, developed at individual schools and incorporating the characteristics of individual schools, can help to manage classrooms with diverse student needs. TSTs should incorporate the following critical elements: (1) clearly established policies and procedures with the active involvement of parents, staff, and students; (2) creation of a process whereby teachers and at-risk students meet regularly with the TST; (3) communication of the TST process to parents on a regular basis; (4) communication with parents to build alliances; (5) inservice training for all staff on the TST process and function; (6) regular TST meetings to discuss key issues; (7) follow-up procedures for teachers to contact TST members; (8) planned evaluation of the TST process for each student participating; and (9) support for the local design of the TST. Included is the regulation establishing TSTs, a 10-item bibliography, and lists of members of the prereferral activities team and the Associate Commissioner's Action Group. (JB)

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STRUCTURING SCHOOLS
FOR STUDENT SUCCESS....

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TEACHER SUPPORT TEAMS:

MEETING THE CHALLENGE OF

AT-RISK STUDENTS

IN REGULAR EDUCATION

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From the Commissioner

A FOCUS ON TEACHER SUPPORT TEAMS:

In June 1988, the Department of Education convened a group of concerned professionals, parents and advocates to concentrate on strategies for strengthening pre-referral activities. The group soon reached the conclusion that the scope of its task was much broader and more complex. Members believed that the group should address the issue of how schools could develop a systematic process of identifying children and youth experiencing learning or social problems. This process may involve adjustments in an individual student's regular education program and/or modifications in a school's curriculum or organization to reflect the needs of various group(s) of at-risk students. Structural changes in how regular education and special education operate must be considered in developing such a process.

The subgroup proposed that TEACHER SUPPORT TEAMS be established to help administrators, teachers and other school personnel and parents meet the challenge of identifying at-risk students in regular education. This paper outlines the overall design and implementation of such teams.

The Department of Education is aware that other models may be developed that can achieve the same results as TEACHER SUPPORT TEAMS. Furthermore, special education program opportunities must remain an option to those students who require such services. Finally, the Department believes that by strengthening regular education programming and continuing to offer special education services, school districts can better serve the growing and changing needs of children and youth in the Commonwealth.

Harold Raynolds Jr

Harold Raynolds, Jr.
Commissioner

BACKGROUND

Regular education has the responsibility to identify and develop programs which meet the diverse needs of today's students.

In Massachusetts, school committees are responsible for ensuring that all school-age children and youth receive an education program. To accomplish this work, school committees use a wide array of approaches which are guided by the public's priorities in the school district, by the district's ability to financially support needed programs and by the unique educational needs of the students in the district. The unique needs of each student lie at the heart of all activity undertaken by public school staff. Although there has been a proliferation of formally organized programs and services intended to serve the particular needs of each student (i.e., bilingual education, special education, vocational education, gifted and talented programs), it is the primary responsibility of the regular education staff to identify and accommodate these unique needs within the regular programs of the school district.

The public schools' task of accommodating for individual differences in students is an enormous challenge. Parents, students, teachers and administrators must have support mechanisms available within each school building on which to base the decisions that need to be made for each student. Effective vehicles that can be used to identify and support regular education services required by students include the establishment of building-based TEACHER SUPPORT TEAMS. The research clearly indicates that such teams have the following key benefits:

TEACHER SUPPORT TEAMS are effective vehicles to identify and support regular education services.

- Regular education instructional programs within a school building accommodate the broad range of student abilities and interests.
- A structured support/assistance system is created for teachers.
- Student competence in basic skills is promoted by helping teachers vary their instructional strategies.
- Inappropriate special education evaluation requests are reduced.
- Parents, teachers, administrators and students enjoy a sense of mutual involvement in problem-solving around critical student needs.
- Teachers realize professional growth through suggestions from and interaction with the team.

STATUTORY BACKGROUND

In Massachusetts, school committees are guided in the task of designing strategies for regular education modifications (such as TEACHER SUPPORT TEAMS) by the requirements of Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 71B and the Chapter 766 Regulations. Chapter 766 Regulation 314.0 (see Appendix) prescribes the obligation to make efforts to meet the student's needs within the regular education program before a referral for special education is made. Ensuring that this responsibility of regular education is accomplished will allow school districts to efficiently use all available resources to meet ever increasing and complex student needs.

WHAT IS THE CHALLENGE?

State and related federal special education statutes have given the public a legacy of outstanding models for educating students with special needs. At the same time, unforeseen and disturbing developments have arisen in the area of regular education. Regular educators have come to rely on special needs programs to "educate" those students who do not perform at "normal" achievement or behavior levels. In some cases, regular educators have been encouraged to believe that learning or behavior problems must be referred to special education, and, further, that as professionals they possess few of the abilities or skills that are needed to deal with these students in the context of the regular classroom. Indeed, in some cases the use of "pullout programs" in special education and in regular education support services, such as Chapter I, remedial reading and school counseling, has only served to exacerbate the isolation of both the students and the classroom teacher. In addition, these programs have interfered with the coordination that is essential to meet the particular needs of each student.

Pullout remedial programs have contributed to regular education feeling less empowered to help at-risk students.

These developments have occurred at a time when schools have been asked to become more responsible for the social, emotional and physical needs of their students. Although the changing social patterns and lack of traditional family and community structures may have produced students with more unique needs, these same students may not necessarily require special education services.

Regular classroom teachers need support from school districts in order to allow the wide variety of students attending public schools today to achieve their maximum potential. In no way should the

Regular and special education must work together to assist all students at risk of failure.

recommendations included in this paper prevent those students who clearly qualify for special education services from receiving these services. However, it is a basic responsibility of the regular education system to identify any students who are at-risk academically or emotionally, to assess their needs, and to provide support for both teachers and students within the context of the regular classroom. In turn, it is the responsibility of special education teachers to integrate their services into the work of the regular classroom and to support and consult with regular education teachers.

MEETING THE CHALLENGE

TEACHER SUPPORT TEAMS may be designed in a variety of ways. The most successful assistance team models are those that are developed by regular educators under the strong leadership of building principals and that incorporate the characteristics of the individual school building. The following critical elements, based on research and current practice, have been used by successful teams to help teachers manage classrooms with diverse student needs.

1. Establish clear policies and procedures with the active involvement of parents, staff and students. These policies must ensure that students with academic, attendance and discipline problems, as well as those at-risk of pregnancy, depression and suicide, peer violence, family violence/abuse and substance abuse, are identified so they can receive assistance.

2. Create a process whereby teachers with students who are experiencing academic or emotional difficulties meet regularly with a team. For initial implementation of the TEACHER SUPPORT TEAM, a weekly meeting has proven to be optimal. Teams should be supported by the principal and be comprised of school staff who are aware of the problem. The team may include grade level teachers, the school nurse, the counselor, the social worker, the psychologist, the remedial specialist and outside agency staff. It is important to consider the needs of cultural and/or linguistic minority students by including a team member with the same language and/or background.

3. Communicate the nature of the TEACHER SUPPORT TEAM process and the Chapter 766 process to parents on a regular basis through the school handbook, parent meetings and newsletters. Students should also be informed. The distinction between the two processes must be clearly delineated.

Parents should have a clear statement of their rights to refer their child for special education evaluation if they believe the TEACHER SUPPORT TEAM's interventions are not working.

4. Communicate with parents throughout the process in a manner that builds alliances. This communication should invite parental input in developing and carrying out strategies. Deadlines for implementing strategies should be set so that their effectiveness can be evaluated. Where the strategies have been unsuccessful, and school officials and/or the parents believe the student may need special education services, the student should be referred for a special education evaluation.

5. Provide all staff with an organized and ongoing inservice training program detailing the purposes, benefits and implementation approach of the TEACHER SUPPORT TEAM process and outlining their right to refer a student for special education evaluation. During these sessions, clear information that describes the resources and time allotted to staff for participation in the process, particularly the availability of substitute coverage for teachers attending team meetings, should be provided. Methods of communicating effectively with parents should be emphasized.

6. Require that the TEACHER SUPPORT TEAM meet regularly or at teacher request to discuss the following topics:
   - how instructional strategies may be varied to help teachers and students;
   - how behavioral interventions may be adapted to improve behavior;
   - how the school climate could be improved (i.e., respect for cultural diversity, elimination of sexual harassment, creation of structures to resolve conflicts);
   - what school policies need to be modified (e.g., course credit flexibility);
   - how students are grouped, programs developed and schedules made flexible to meet the learning styles and needs of students;
   - how social and health services are provided to students and coordinated with community and human services agencies;
   - how a one-to-one relationship between an adult in the school and a student can be established;

No child who is entitled should be denied special education services as a result of this regular education process.

- what other supports are needed by teachers;
- how to improve the students' functioning in the classroom.

7. Establish a follow-up mechanism to ensure that an individual teacher has continuing contact with at least one member of the TEACHER SUPPORT TEAM. This allows the suggested strategies to be evaluated and determines next steps.

8. Plan the evaluation of the TEACHER SUPPORT TEAM process for each student. The referring teacher and principal should negotiate this evaluation, which should be based on good problem definition from the outset of activities and be defined by expected behavioral outcomes for the student. Formal and informal evaluation strategies of the school building's TEACHER SUPPORT TEAM process should be established jointly by the principal and the team members so that the ever-changing needs of the school building are taken into account.

9. Support the local design of the TEACHER SUPPORT TEAM on a regular basis using the following suggested resources:
   - administrator and teacher training provided on either a district, regional or collaborative basis;
   - publications featuring curriculum modification strategies and innovative instructional and behavior management approaches for teachers to use in the regular classroom;
   - consultation time from professionals, as requested by the team, for advice on either group or individual student needs;
   - teacher stipends for after-school meetings when necessary, or a logging system for compensatory time to account for teachers' involvement in after-school meetings.

Many of these recommended practices are already being implemented successfully in cities and towns across the Commonwealth and in other school districts across the United States. The broad success of the TEACHER SUPPORT TEAM approach clearly stems from the public education system's desire to meet the ever increasing array of student needs that present themselves each day in the regular classroom. School personnel and parents working together to implement and/or further refine existing assistance team models should refer to the bibliography on TEACHER SUPPORT TEAMS found in this paper, as well as contact the Department of Education.

The critical elements of developing a TEACHER SUPPORT TEAM are to:

- *establish clear policies and procedures;*
- *create a weekly meeting time for staff to discuss the students and changes in organization and curriculum;*
- *communicate the process to all staff, parents and students;*
- *provide adequate professional development for staff;*
- *evaluate the process as a whole as well as for each student.*

APPENDIX

Chapter 766 Regulation 314.0 states:

Prior to referral of a child for an evaluation, all efforts shall be made to meet such child's needs within the context of the services which are part of the regular education program. In addition all efforts shall be made to modify the regular education program to meet such needs. Such efforts and their results shall be documented and placed in the child's record. Nothing contained in this paragraph shall be construed to limit or condition the right to refer a child for an evaluation.

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